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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: GOT WILL HAVE DIFFICULTY FOLLOWING THROUGH ON
KURDISH INITIATIVE

REF: ANKARA 4842

Classified by CDA Nancy McEldowney; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: Political observers widely credit PM Erdogan with breaking new rhetorical ground on the Kurdish issue in the context of his recent visit to Diyarbakir. But contacts say they doubt the GOT is prepared to follow through on the initiative. Members of the (PKK-related) Democratic Peoples' Party (DEHAP) have praised the PM's statements on the "Kurdish problem," which they view as an indication that the PM is willing to address issues on their agenda, such as a broad amnesty for PKK militants. However, our contacts say any government perceived to be following such a path would quickly lose support. Military leaders, who pressured Erdogan to address the issue, are concerned that the PM used vague language that could be interpreted as supporting the concept of a separate Kurdish identity; their concerns appear to be reflected in a National Security Council (NSC) statement stressing the "integrity" and "indivisibility" of the country. End Summary.

PM Uses New Rhetoric on Kurds...

2. (U) Politicians and pundits continue to debate the meaning and importance of PM Erdogan's recent visit to Diyarbakir and public comments on the issue of Turkey's Kurds (reftel). Erdogan has been widely credited with "breaking the memorized rhetoric" regarding the Kurdish issue. A number of contacts have told us Erdogan went farther than previous PMs in addressing the subject by referring to a "Kurdish problem," indicating (though indirectly and vaguely) that the GOT has made mistakes regarding the issue, and assuring the public that the problem will be resolved through democratic means. However, our contacts question whether the GOT can turn the new rhetoric into a new reality.

3. (C) DEHAP members have praised the PM's initiative. (Note: DEHAP is widely believed to be linked to the PKK. Its members deny any direct links; they claim they share the PKK's long-term goals while rejecting violence as a means to achieve them. DEHAP leaders recently decided to close the party and join a new successor party. End Note.) DEHAP President Tuncer Bakirhan acknowledged to us that DEHAP officials told party supporters in the southeast not to turn out for Erdogan's August 12 speech in Diyarbakir, to express the party's skepticism about the PM's sincerity. Only about 700-800 people attended the speech. Nevertheless, he said DEHAP supporters were encouraged by the PM's message.

4. (C) Bakirhan believes Erdogan took a step toward a new, more flexible approach to the Kurdish issue. He said PKK leaders were caught off guard by the PM's initiative, and felt compelled to respond by announcing a one-month cessation of operations. He averred that the public, weary of the conflict, is ready for a new approach, as indicated by the absence of public criticism of Erdogan's initiative beyond nationalist circles. Bakirhan noted that even members of an association representing the families of security forces killed by the PKK gave their blessing to Erdogan's effort.

...But Lacks Follow-Up Plan

5. (C) Turkey's (generally leftist) Kurdish human rights activists also praise the PM, although they are more skeptical than Bakirhan that the GOT will follow through. Yusuf Alatas, president of the Human Rights Association, and Yilmaz Ensaroglu, former president of the human rights organization Mazlum Der, said Kurdish issues have never been high on the agenda of the ruling AK Party (AKP). Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP government has taken small, grudging steps on Kurdish language and cultural rights, and that only at the direct urging of the EU. As a result, they said, the GOT lacks a program for addressing Kurdish issues and is not prepared to follow up on Erdogan's promising remarks. "Universities and NGOs need to start holding conferences to discuss Kurdish cultural rights and the problems of the southeast," Ensaroglu said. "We have been

afraid to debate sensitive issues like these, and as a result we have no ideas about how to resolve them." Alatas said he wants to believe the PM is sincere, but in any case the AKP government cannot resolve the Kurdish problem on its own; any new initiative that is not supported by the Turkish state will have no chance.

16. (C) Observers widely credit the State, in the form of the military, for pressuring Erdogan to address the Kurdish issue. In a series of public statements, including a July 19 speech by General Basbug, then deputy chief of the Turkish General Staff, military leaders have emphasized the need for a multi-pronged approach to PKK terrorism, including economic and social initiatives in addition to military force. With these statements, the military has subtly called attention to the absence of a GOT program for the southeast, where rampant unemployment, poor education, and backward social traditions create a breeding ground for the PKK.

Military Uneasy with Ill-Defined Statements

17. (C) But the military and other state elements appear uneasy with what they consider the careless nature of Erdogan's remarks. The PM's comments, while groundbreaking, were vague -- for example, he did not define what he meant by "Kurdish problem," nor did he say what "mistakes" the State had made. Amidst the praise, there has been criticism from some who argue that Erdogan's words could be interpreted in a manner harmful to Turkey's interests. Former President Demirel, for example, is among those who have argued that by referring to the "Kurdish problem," Erdogan reinforced the divisions in Turkish society, possibly strengthening the hands of separatists. Others have argued that the PM's pledge to resolve the issue through democratic means could imply setting aside the use of military force against the PKK, or even negotiating with the terrorist organization. Indeed, when the PKK responded to Erdogan's Diyarbakir speech by declaring a one-month cessation of operations, some of Erdogan's critics charged that he had already unwittingly raised the PKK's status to the level of interlocutor.

18. (C) Following its August 23 meeting, the NSC, comprising civilian and military leaders, issued a statement emphasizing the "integrity" and "indivisibility" of the country, while also calling for a multi-faceted campaign against terrorism. Sema Kilicer, political officer at the European Commission Representation to Turkey, told us she views the statement as a reflection of the military's desire to define the limits of any approach to the Kurdish issue. The message, she believes, is that the military wants the government to take on the social/economic aspects of the campaign against terror, but without referring to a separate, Kurdish identity or completely removing the restrictions on Kurdish language and cultural expression. Military leaders have also repeatedly emphasized that the government must operate within the Constitution, which emphasizes the "indivisibility of the Republic" (a mantra here) and the status of Turkish as the official language.

Next Steps Could Prove Risky for GOT

19. (C) Faruk Demir, a Turkish political analyst, and Suavi Aydin, Hacettepe University anthropology professor and expert on Anatolian minorities, told us they believe Erdogan set a trap for himself with his ill-prepared comments, into which he may fall if his next steps are not more careful. Demir and Aydin said DEHAP members are encouraged by Erdogan's statements because they are hopeful the PM is indicating a willingness to pursue some of the items on the DEHAP agenda, such as negotiations with the PKK, a general amnesty for PKK militants, the release of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from prison, and a constitutional amendment citing Turks and Kurds as co-founders of the Republic. Bakirhan acknowledged as much to us, listing each of these examples as long-term goals of the party.

110. (C) The problem for Erdogan, Demir and Aydin agreed, is that any government perceived to be considering negotiating with the PKK or elevating the status of Kurds in the Constitution would quickly lose both public support and its grip on power. How, then, can Erdogan follow through on his initiative without appearing to cross these red lines? "No one, including Erdogan, knows what the government will do next," Aydin said.

Comment: GOT Not Prepared to Follow-Through

111. (C) Though Erdogan struck many of the right chords during his initiative, we agree with our contacts' assessment that the GOT is not prepared to follow through. Erdogan made no

specific proposals, other than directing the High Board of Radio and Television to remove obstacles to Kurdish-language broadcasting on local media outlets. Though welcome, this would have little impact in the southeast. A longstanding Embassy contact, an attorney from the southeastern province of Hakkari, noted that Kurds in the southeast already receive several Kurdish-language TV channels broadcasting from abroad. What Kurds in the region really want, she said, is an amnesty for their sons and daughters with the PKK in the mountains. That appears no more likely today than before Erdogan's trip to Diyarbakir.

12. (C) The obstacles facing Erdogan are heightened by the recent increase in PKK activity. As long as Turks are feeling frustrated and powerless in the face of a perceived PKK resurgence, the GOT will remain hyper-sensitive to allegations that it lacks resolve in the fight against terrorism.
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